

BURNED BUT NOT CONSUMED
Sermon for Epiphany 1—Is 43: 1-7, Lk 3:15-17
LPC, 1/13/13

Do you remember a substance called black salve? I googled black salve this past week and to my horror discovered it is currently being marketed as an alternative treatment for skin cancer. But the black salve described on the websites as a cancer treatment (which use, by the way, has been disavowed by the FDA) does not sound like the black salve my mother used on me in the late 1950's.

What I remember was something the color of death that came in the form of a solid stick. It had to be melted with a match, kind of like sealing wax, onto the pad of a bandage, which was then applied, while still burning hot, to a wound. The theory was that the heat would draw out all the infection and corruption.

Assuming, for the moment, that the theories behind black salve were correct, and that the treatment was both effective and the best available, my mother was helping me be well. How much must it have pained her that I screamed and flailed! She had to believe: first, that what she was doing would make me heal in the long run; second, that the result was worth the present pain both to herself and to me; and three, that I personally was worth the ordeal.

While black salve may have been more or less discredited, there remain several legitimate medical treatments that work on the principle of burning out the bad. Laser treatments, chemotherapy, cauterization and radiation, to name a few, can be likened to burning. On the most basic level, these treatments are *destructive*, but they also save lives.

To take this theme of healing by burning out of the context of the human body, precious metals also are purified by being put to the fire. A hunk of gold ore out of the ground cannot be made clean by simple washing. The dross must be burned out.

Why am I talking about purification by burning? Who can possibly benefit from this kind of thought? There are two kinds of people to whom this discussion is relevant.

First, this discussion is relevant to you if you have wondered what in the world John the Baptist is talking about in today's Gospel lesson from Luke. John the Baptist says that, unlike John himself who baptizes with mere water, Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Water washes away what can easily be removed. To purify to the essence of what we really are requires fire. And this is the kind of deep and lasting healing that Jesus provides.

The second type of person to whom this discussion of purification by fire is relevant is the sort of person who finds himself or herself actually *in* the fire right now. I have been consulted on multiple occasions by people appealing to me for support when they are trying to live out their baptismal vows to love and to follow Christ in a dysfunctional setting. The effort to love has left them vulnerable to injury from other persons who are less selflessly motivated. And the people who have come to me are hurting.

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

Though I can provide pastoral support and perspective, I cannot stop the hurting. Sometimes there is no way to avoid the hurting if you are committed to the ultimate healing. It may not seem fair that the most functional person in a dysfunctional situation bears the lion's share of the pain that healing requires, but this is often the case.

This certainly was the case with Jesus. Jesus was the only human being who never sinned, but as the most functional person in a dysfunctional world, he bore the brunt of the healing process.

There is good news however, for people who are in the fire. In the first place, while you feel the heat, your fundamental personhood, what makes you you, beloved as it is of God, cannot and will not be destroyed. You have God's word on that. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, who is quoting the revelation of God, "When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

The second bit of good news relates back to what I said about my mother applying the black salve. She believed me to be worth the ordeal, as difficult as it was for both of us. Like most mothers, she would have stopped at nothing, not even my momentary pain, certainly not her own pain, to make me whole again.

Likewise, you are worth the painful smelting process. You are, incredibly enough, infinitely worthy in God's eyes. Again, as Isaiah says, "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

One thing to remember is that God does not just feel this way about individuals, God feels this way about the whole human race. Therefore, sometimes, a chosen few of us bear the pain of the purifying fire not only for our own sake, but for the sake of a relationship, or for an entire community. That is the way of Christ. That is what we buy into when we are baptized into the community of Christ.

Perhaps if parents knew and believed this they would not bring their precious children for baptism. On the other hand, parents who brave the baptism of their infants really are acting in their children's best interest. While baptism is not protection from the purifying flame, it is protection from the consuming flame.

In baptism we actually become Moses' burning bush. In baptism, we burn with the Spirit of God, but are not consumed, and never will be. We have God's word on that.